

Review

The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s), Paul O'Neill (2012),
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While the art world of the twentieth century was largely mapped by the triangulated activities of artists, commercial gallerists or dealers and art critics, the prominence of the curator has come to define the early twenty-first-century art landscape. Walking through Tate Modern in 2013, it is striking to note that almost every room is now attributed to a curator. Once assumed to be the 'backroom' preserve of diligent, specialist scholars entrusted with the care of collections, the curatorial role has simultaneously expanded, but also fragmented into a kaleidoscope of activities related to the selection and arrangement of objects, materials and experiences. Today everyone from Etsy store dealers through to social media doyennes claim 'to curate'. It is not difficult to understand the appeal of this application of curation for our time. Whereas once it was the discovery of knowledge that seemed the most difficult and heroic task, it is now the intelligent selection and arrangement of information that is our biggest challenge. We have a surfeit of stimuli that require taming and the curator's job has always been to understand and manage the unruly riches of collections, whether public or private.

Today the star curator has become as recognizable as the artists whose work they deal with. While this rise to prominence may seem both recent and sudden, Paul O'Neill's book ably demonstrates that for at least 40 years the curatorial role has been undergoing tremendous change and over that same period there has been significant debate about the desirable levels of its influence.

In 1972 the artist Daniel Buren responded to Harald Szeemann's controversial approach to 'Documenta 5' by claiming that the exhibition itself had now become its own subject. Szeemann responded that Buren's complaint was as an excessive overreaction because it was unlikely that the role of the curator would ever usurp the primary creative role of the artist (Buren 2010: 213). In retrospect, it is clear to see that Buren had accurately identified a fundamental shift with the curator emerging as a separate authorial voice in the exhibition context. He was not alone in objecting to its influence. By 2004, Buren was still protesting the situation for artists, but now he regarded it as having deteriorated much further, thus he was urging artists to reject their passivity in the face of growing curatorial power and to wrestle back some control of the discursive agenda as artist-organizers (Buren 2010). Rather than being a prescient and radical call to arms, his position appeared to cling to the idea that artists and their practices were still only the raw stuff of exhibitions, completely at the mercy of curatorial interpretation, rather than active participants in the mediation process. This appeared to ignore the fact that a new generation of artists fully recognized the fundamental changes that had been cemented in the 1990s and were already involved in the sort of boundary crossing he extolled. In

some cases the divisions between artist, curator, critic and art historian were already increasingly blurred.

There are still a number of anxieties expressed about the creative role of the curator, perhaps most prominently by Robert Storr, who steadfastly repudiates the validity of the curator/auteur position and insists that the curator must always be considered a secondary and organizational figure. New concerns have also emerged, particularly with the explosion in graduate academic training for curators, but these seem equivalent to earlier complaints about the institutionalization of artists' training and rely on a certain nostalgia for the era of the accidental curator; an era that Storr also epitomizes. By showing that attitudes and positions regarding the role and status of the curator have been in a state of flux since at least since the 1960s, O'Neill's book acknowledges many of these anxieties, but makes an important contribution to ongoing discussions of this issue by placing the debate in a wider historical framework.

Harald Szeemann is usually identified as having redefined the role of the contemporary curator as exhibition maker. When Szeemann died in 2005 there was a flurry of discussion surrounding his contribution to the field along with acknowledgment of Buren's critique of Szeemann's role. Aaron Schuster, writing in *Frieze* magazine at the time, asserted that what was needed was 'a critical history of curating, a study of the transformations in the manner of art's staging and public presentation' (2005). In fact, as O'Neill points out, this study had already begun in earnest earlier in the 1990s. The summaries he provides of key contributions relating to this previously invisible history

are an excellent stock take of this literature. In his contribution to the 2007 publication, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, O'Neill acknowledged that the majority of available texts about curators and curating placed a strong emphasis on individual curators and their personal points of reference (2007). Anthologies of curator statements or interviews with curators were the most common form. This marked emphasis on individual experience at least permitted a multiplicity of voices and positions to be expressed, which eroded the notion of a curatorial orthodoxy. Instead of making the processes and philosophical agendas of curatorial activity more transparent though, as many of these publications set out to do, this treatment provided an often bewildering and fragmented historical view of curatorial practices. Such an approach often only served to reinforce the 'remystification' of the curator.

By contrast, O'Neill's book provides a concise overview of, as he puts it, 'how curating has changed art and how art has changed curating' (O'Neill 2012: 6) The book is divided into three sections, each dealing with a key transitional development: (1) the historical development of curatorial discourse; (2) the influence of the Biennial phenomenon and, finally, (3) how art and curating have converged since the 1990s.

There are, however, moments of over-optimistic overreach. O'Neill's summary of the changes that the new mega-exhibitions have brought about is a much more generous appraisal of their overall impact than the evidence would suggest is warranted. The description of their adaptation of "the figure of the multitude as a force for good" and their resistance to 'the hegemonic power of Western art history' (O'Neill 2012: 85) seem particularly overstated. Much has been written about the enormous influence that

Biennial culture has had on the exhibition landscape and, while the chapter on Biennials is a useful addition to publications such as the *Biennial Reader* (D. Buren, 2010), the clearest and most useful material can be found in the first and final chapters.

By providing a concise history in his first chapter of ‘The emergence of curatorial discourse from the Late 1960s to the present’, O’Neill successfully avoids the fragmentary array of personal narratives characteristic of the analysis of curating by grounding its discourse in a common history of key figures and their motivations. O’Neill identifies the critical evolution of artistic intervention throughout the twentieth century in which the mediated environment of presentation becomes clearly and self-reflexively revealed. He sets out examples such as El Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* (1927/1928) or much later, Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store* (1961–1962), as pivotal experiments in which the exhibition is treated as its own subject. O’Neill only briefly acknowledges the complex influences of other figures, such as the Hannover Landesmuseum director, Alexander Dorner in the 1920s, and the Institute of Contemporary Art Assistant Director, Lawrence Alloway in the 1950s. The crucial influence of radical exhibition designers such as Frederick Kiesler is more closely assessed. More careful engagement with this rich history shows that the shifting territory of art’s criticality (its understanding of the nature of an artwork), as O’Neill acknowledges, drives at least part of the transformation in and of art that pushes the role of the curator to the foreground. By documenting how the increasingly critical position of the curator coincides with artists’ increased criticality regarding the exhibition environment as part of the institution of art, O’Neill emphasizes their complex interrelation rather than the strict opposition outlined by Buren. Ironically,

the curator Seth Seigelaub's desire to demystify the position and processes of his role, for example, was analogous with the work of artists such as Michael Asher, or indeed Daniel Buren.

O'Neill discusses a number of influential artist-driven, but curatorially constructed projects from the 1980s and 1990s in the third and final chapter to illustrate this convergence of form. Examples such as Group Material, with their exploration of negotiated community priorities and transdisciplinarity, as well as exhibition design approaches that emphasized the interdependence of the artwork within its context rather than its autonomy, anticipate the work carried out by a number of later curatorial projects. This parallel development of discursive criticality in both art and curatorial practice forms the backbone of O'Neill's own position. O'Neill's view is that when considered as another form of artistic production, radical and collaborative curatorial approaches become a productive challenge to the mythical autonomy of art and artists and 'an opportunity to engage in a critique within the field of cultural production as a whole' (O'Neill 2012: 110). His discussion of the forms of experimental curating that have emerged since the 1980s, such as 'the Exhibition-as-Medium' or the 'Artist-Curator', identifies a range of approaches that can be considered contributors to the very broad church of 'New Curatorship'.

O'Neill rejects any assumed binary opposition of artist and curator as an unproductive position that inadequately addresses the range of alternative approaches that have been taken to the exhibition form. The chief innovation that he champions is the reframing of

exhibitions as durational conversations rather than momentary events. This is his ethical position, as well as an aesthetic one. As much as one might agree with O'Neill's advocacy for an open-ended and 'co-productive' process, there remains the unresolved paradox of any curatorial approach escaping its own predetermined agenda. O'Neill's steadfast belief in the potential for 'the curatorial' to open up new discursive pathways to knowledge, or as Maria Lind has suggested, 'disturb existing power structures' (Lind 2009: 103), raises some complex questions. The force of the curator as the project initiator or facilitator is a difficult power structure to overcome. If curators surrender this power altogether, what will define them? While Buren was concerned about the artist effectively disappearing into the field of curatorial intent, is there also the risk that the role of the curator can become so broad and all-encompassing that it is rendered meaningless?

Despite these reservations, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* provides a concise and immensely useful review of the key developments and influential figures in the field. The careful consideration of how and why the exhibition has evolved as it has and the complicated negotiations of authorship that have been part of that evolution makes an important contribution. Its use as a set text in curatorial education seems inevitable. It will almost certainly resonate most strongly with a generation of artists and curators who already see their practices as complementary and sometimes interchangeable, and for them O'Neill's book will serve as a rich point of reference.

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